



*Alice, Sweet Alice*

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## Cast

**Linda Miller** Catherine Spages  
**Mildred Clinton** Mrs. Tredoni  
**Paula E. Sheppard** Alice Spages  
**Niles McMaster** Dom Spages  
**Jane Lowry** Aunt Annie DeLorenze  
**Rudolph Willrich** Father Tom  
**Michael Hardstark** Detective Spina  
**Alphonso DeNoble** Mr. Alphonso  
**Gary Allen** Jim DeLorenze  
**Brooke Shields** Karen Spages  
**Louisa Horton** Dr. Whitman  
**Tom Signorelli** Detective Brennan  
**Lillian Roth** Pathologist  
**Patrick Gorman** Father Pat  
**Kathy Rich** Angela DeLorenze  
**Ted Tirling** Detective Cranston  
**Mary Boylan** Mother Superior  
**Joseph Rossi** Father Joe  
**Marco Quazzo** Robert DeLorenze

## Crew

Directed by **Alfred Sole**  
Produced by **Richard K. Rosenberg**  
Executive Producers **Alfred Sole, Richard K. Rosenberg**  
Associate Producer **Marc G. Greenberg**  
Written by **Rosemary Ritvo, Alfred Sole**  
Editor **M. Edward Salier**  
Composer **Stephen Lawrence**  
Production Manager **Rosemary Ritvo**  
Costume Designer **Michelle Cohen**









# Malice, Sweet Malice

by Michael Blyth

*Alice, Sweet Alice* (1976) is a hard film to place. While some claim it to be a formative slasher, predating John Carpenter's genre-defining *Halloween* (1978) by some two years, others argue it shares more in common with the giallo tradition which dominated Italian genre cinema in the 1970s. A case could also be made that Alfred Sole's religious shocker, with its symbiotic relationship between devout Catholicism and brutal violence, sits more comfortably alongside holy horrors such as *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Omen* (1976). Meanwhile, there are those who view the film as an allegorical psychodrama, a macabre meditation on familial grief reminiscent of Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973). The truth is, *Alice, Sweet Alice* is all of these things. And more. As mysterious and elusive as the titular moppet herself, Sole's film is almost impossible to pin down, a fact that makes it so endlessly fascinating and, in its own perverse way, so bracingly singular.

First debuting at the 1976 Chicago International Film Festival under its original title, *Communion*, (which was subsequently changed by an interfering studio who worried it would be mistaken for a religious film), *Alice, Sweet Alice* was director Alfred Sole's second feature, following his infamous erotic debut *Deep Sleep* (1972). Little more than a low-budget porno produced by an eager young filmmaker desperate to get a foot in the door, *Deep Sleep* was destined for obscurity until the film was unexpectedly prosecuted under claims of obscenity in Sole's home town of Paterson, New Jersey. A highly publicized court case (and subsequent settlement) followed, which saw the naïve director hit with a significant fine, a one-year suspended sentence, and a two-year probation period during which he was banned from making any films. To add insult to injury, the film was such a cause célèbre, Sole was even formally excommunicated from his local church. It wasn't exactly the foot in the door that the aspiring filmmaker had intended, but it did offer him a crash course in the harsh realities of the business, and the drive to continue creating the work he felt truly passionate about.







Sole began initial work on *Alice, Sweet Alice* in 1974, two years after completing *Deep Sleep*. Co-writing the screenplay with his neighbor Rosemary Ritvo, an English professor at a local university, the pair set their story in the familiar locales of Paterson, partly drawing inspiration from Sole's own small-town upbringing with an Italian American catholic family. The story that eventually emerged, that of an antisocial young girl suspected of the brutal murder of her sister at her first Communion, was a provocative one, and one that required the right performers for the delicate roles of its two pre-teen protagonists. It was the casting of Brooke Shields in the small but unforgettable role as the ill-fated Karen which in many ways turned out to be the film's unanticipated trump card. Unknown at the time of filming, Shields shot to fame a couple of years later when she played a prostitute in Louis Malle's controversial 1978 film *Pretty Baby* at the tender age of 12. Malle's film, which featured nude scenes with the underage actress, caused quite a sensation, transforming the young star into a household name in the process. Keen to cash in on the newfound stardom of the budding actress, Sole's film was eventually re-released in 1981 (with Shields' name given prominent billing), this time under yet another title, the attention-grabbing *Holy Terror*.

But while Shields may have helped shine a much-needed spotlight on this under-the-radar genre oddity, it is Paula Sheppard as the 12-year-old Alice who is the real star of the show, bringing a depth and nuance to her portrayal of the troubled youngster perhaps only possible for an actor significantly older than the character they were playing (the baby-faced Sheppard was actually 19 at the time of filming). Sheppard's Alice is no malevolent monster à la *The Bad Seed* (1956), nor is she a misunderstood innocent swept up in a catalogue of escalating horrors. Instead, Alice is the despondent product of an emotionally unstable family, fueled not only by a desperate craving for love and attention, but also a simmering streak of anger and resentment. Even in the film's closing moments, when her name is cleared, we are left wondering just how harmless she really is. The film's haunting final shot, in which Alice knowingly looks directly into the camera, indicates a calculating mind at work. She may not have been the killer this time around, but perhaps what we have been witness to was the birth of a sociopath?

As to the question of where *Alice, Sweet Alice* fits in the annals of horror cinema (if it fits anywhere at all, that is), Alfred Sole himself has openly name-checked some of his influences, including the films of Hitchcock, French psychological thriller *Les Diaboliques* (1955) and the aforementioned classics *The Bad Seed* and *Don't Look Now*. Interestingly

though, Sole states that Italian giallo cinema was not an influence on his film, claiming to have never even seen the work of the genre's most famous auteur, Dario Argento, at the time of production. Despite this, the spirit of Argento, along with his contemporaries Mario Bava and Sergio Martino (to name but a couple), can very much be felt within the twisted textures of his film. There are surface similarities in the narrative, which plays out as part gothic horror, part murder mystery, part police procedural. But even more than this, it is Sole's expressive visuals and histrionic tendencies that have led several critics to argue that *Alice, Sweet Alice* is the most giallo-esque American film of all time. Even now, over four decades later, it is hard to think of an equivalent which so convincingly captures the sub-genre's sense of baroque grandiosity.

Of course, in broad terms, the influence of giallo can be traced directly to the slasher boom which dominated US horror cinema of the early 1980s, so it is no surprise that *Alice, Sweet Alice* should also be frequently discussed in slasher terms. And again, it certainly shares many superficial similarities to the countless stalk and slash pictures that would follow a few years later – the distinctively masked killer being one of the most obvious points of comparison. But there are also many things which set it apart. The murderous set pieces, while often elaborately staged and relatively gruesome, are few and far between, not necessarily forming the basis for the action. In fact, almost an hour passes before we get to the second kill of the film (although there is an attack during this period, but the victim is merely maimed rather than dispatched). Instead, the structure is far more intricate than the formulaic simplicity one might expect from a typical body count movie, with Sole far more interested in exploring the psychology of the living than reveling in the viscera of the dead.

The story takes its most unexpected turn when the identity of the killer (thoughtlessly spoiled in an early VHS release of the film) is revealed over thirty minutes ahead of the film's conclusion, rather than during the final act as audiences might have expected. This bold decision effectively shifts the film from a whodunit to a 'whydunnit', and thus launching it from psycho thriller into the heady realms of melodrama during the closing act.







As with most giallo classics (or slashers too for that matter), subtlety does not appear to be at the forefront of Sole's mind, and while *Alice, Sweet Alice* can often be a genuinely affecting and deeply sad piece of work, it can also be deliciously heavy-handed in its approach. Religious icons and sacred statues loom large in the backgrounds of almost every shot in the film, as though the threat of a higher judgement is ever present. The link between religion and psychosis is hammered home with such obvious delight it can be safely assumed that Sole was taking a swing at the church who only a couple of years before had coldly excommunicated him. Ironically enough, had the church not dismissed Sole following the furor of *Deep Sleep*, it is highly likely they might have done so after the release of his follow up, which rivals *The Exorcist* in terms of gleeful cinematic blasphemy. The brutal killing of Karen at her first communion (in which she is strangled and then set on fire), remains shocking to this day, setting the stage for what could be read as a bold exercise in anti-Catholic propaganda.

Similarly unsubtle (and equally pleasurable) are the jarring inconsistencies of performance styles, which can take the film from somber drama to high camp, sometimes within the course of a single scene. Not everyone is as proficient as Sheppard, but of all the performances, it is Jane Lowry's deliriously unhinged turn as Aunt Annie which is guaranteed to raise the most eyebrows. Delivering her lines with such unruly gusto, one might imagine her more at home in an exaggerated telenovela than a serious psychodrama. But far from being a flaw which threatens to undermine the tragedies unfolding on screen, the erratic performance of Lowry (and some of her co-stars) adds a disconcerting sense of madness to the film, as though events have spiraled so far out of control that nothing is beyond the realms of possibility.

When the film was initially released it received mixed reviews from critics. Some celebrated Sole's bold gothic approach and unflinching brutality, while, perhaps unsurprisingly, others dismissed the film as an irresponsible exercise in poor taste. But like it or not, it was hard to deny that it was the product of a unique cinematic voice, signaling the arrival of a striking new genre talent. Perhaps then it is one of horror cinema's greatest misfortunes that such a promise was never truly fulfilled. Sole's next film was the inexplicable *Tanya's Island* from 1980, which starred Denise "Vanity" Matthews as a woman caught in a love triangle between her boyfriend and a wild ape man on a remote tropical island. While sure to delight devoted b-movie aficionados (for those uninformed I would wholeheartedly recommend checking out the trailer), a worthy successor to *Alice, Sweet Alice* it most certainly was not.

Meanwhile Sole's fourth and final film as director came in the form of unfunny horror spoof *Pandemonium* in 1982. In more recent years Sole has established a healthy career as a production designer for TV shows such as *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), *Castle* (2009-2016) and *MacGyver* (2016- ), but it seems his directing days are long behind him. While we could lament his failure to deliver on the talent he undeniably possessed (*Alice, Sweet Alice* is far too accomplished a piece of filmmaking to be dismissed as a mere fluke), we should instead celebrate the fact that we have the film in the first place. Many filmmakers can work their whole lives without ever producing something truly great, but with this gloriously unclassifiable one of a kind, Alfred made his sole masterpiece.

*Michael Blyth is a film programmer for the BFI London Film Festival and BFI Flare: London LGBTQ+ Film Festival. He is the author of Devil's Advocates: In the Mouth of Madness for Auteur Publishing.*











## About the Restoration

*Alice, Sweet Alice* has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution at Warner Bros. Motion Picture Imaging. Additional film elements were scanned in 4K for the alternate title sections.

Picture grading and restoration were completed at Silver Salt Restoration, London

The mono soundtrack was remastered from the original optical negative at Deluxe Audio Services.

The alternate *Holy Terror* TV cut was constructed using the same restored materials and was archived by using tape reference materials.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

Warner Bros. Motion Picture Imaging: **George Feltenstein, Hali Abdullah, Kristen Andrews, Bob Bailey, Jason Keller**

Silver Salt Restoration: **Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, Tom Wiltshire**

Deluxe Audio Services: **Jordan Perry**

All original materials supplied for this restoration were made available under license from Warner Bros. Home Entertainment.

Special thanks to Marc Morris and Will Foran/Cult Canada.

## Production Credits

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Design **Obviously Creative**

Artwork by **Gilles Vranckx**

## Special Thanks

**Alex Agran, Hali Abdullah, Kristen Andrews, Bob Bailey, Michael Blyth, Richard Harland Smith, Michael Gingold, Jason Keller, Stephen Lawrence, Niles McMaster, Alfred Sole, Dante Tomaselli**







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